DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 468 UD 022 449

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TITLE Bridging the Culture Gap in Inner-City Schools: A Summary and Critique of the Approach of Herbert Foster in "Ribbin', Jivin' and Playin' the Dozens."
PUB DATE 1 Jun 82
NOTE 14p.; In: Woods, Sandra, Ed.; Samuda, Ronald, Ed. Perspectives in Immigrant and Minority Education. Washington, D.C., University Press of America, 1982. Paper presented at Perspectives on Urban Education: An Invitational Symposium (North Miami, FL, June 1, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Problems; *Black Youth; *Cultural Differences; Discipline; Elementary Secondary Education; Females; *Games; Inner City; Males; Prisoners; Social Influences; *Student Teacher Relationship; *Subcultures; Teacher Attitudes; Whites
IDENTIFIERS *Foster (Herbert)

ABSTRACT

In this paper, William Wilbanks discusses Herbert Foster's "Ribbin', Jivin', and Playin' the Dozens," a book on the relationship between inner city youth and their teachers. The book's title derives from three types of games often played in the classroom: ribbing, a verbal game of taunting other students or the teacher; jiving, which involves manipulative techniques to protect oneself from trouble; and playing the dozens, in which contestants insult one another until one gives up or resorts to violence. According to Wilbanks, Foster's thesis is that in inner-city schools there is a culture gap between largely black, lower class youth and their largely white, middle-class teachers. Students, behaving according to the rules of their streetcorner subculture, constantly play games to test teachers who misinterpret the games as forms of disruptive behavior. Hence, Foster maintains, educational failure is largely due to teachers' inability to understand the students' subculture. Wilbanks criticizes Foster as being rather too critical of the teacher, and as having neglected the students' role in understanding the teachers' perspectives. Moreover, Wilbanks notes that several of Foster's statements are insufficiently explained. Nevertheless, Wilbanks finds Foster's points valuable in understanding not only inner-city students but also criminals and prisoners who play similar games. (Author/MJL)

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# "BRIDGING THE CULTURE GAP IN INNER-CITY SCHOOLS: A SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE OF THE APPROACH OF HERBERT FOSTER IN RIBBIN', JIVIN' AND PLAYIN' THE DOZENS"

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A Paper Presented at
Perspectives on Urban Education:
An Invitational Symposium
Center for Urban & Minority Education
Florida International University
Bay Vista Campus, N. Miami, FL
June 1, 1982

## INTRODUCTION;

Dr. Herbert Foster is no novice or diletante in the field of urban education. He taught for seventeen years in the secondary schools of New York City (including sixteen years in the "alternative" schools for the disruptive and emotionally disturbed) and has a doctorate in education. Even before the 1974 publication of Ribbin', Jivin' and Playin' the Dozens, he had published widely in educational journals and developed and directed a special curriculum in urban teacher training at the State University of New York at Buffalo. This special training program for prospective teachers in the inner-city schools still continues under his direction. The program has become well-known in part due to the more than 10,000 copies of the book that have been sold.

In addition to his expertise in education and his experience with inner-city, primarily black youth, Dr. Foster is well-read in the area of black culture/subculture. His dissertation involved the "jive lexicon" utilized by black streetcorner youth and he has developed a "jive lexicon test" to demonstrate to white audiences the bias of some standardized vocabulary and/or critical thinking tests. His written works demonstrate a thorough knowledge of literature by and about blacks (much like that of another white scholar, Charles Silberman, 1964, 1970, & 1978).

Ribbin'.... also reflects the personal and intellectual journey of a teacher and scholar who hid under his desk his first day in the classroom in an inner city school when students "tested" him. At the end of that first day he was so despondent that he contemplated quitting teaching. The book thus reflects his personal progression from a frightened, inexperienced and

UD 022 449

naive teacher to the point that he now trains prospective teachers for the experience that he initially found so frightening and frustrating. One can see his progression through the various stages (p. 238ff) that many teachers go through during their tenure in inner-city schools.

The book examines the complex relationship between inner-city youth and their teachers and follows in a long line of such books (e.g., Clark, 1965; Hentoff, 1966; Kozol, 1967; Silberman, 1967; Herndon, 1968; Foster, 1971). However, Herbert Foster's book is unique for several reasons: (1) he is a white man writing about the subculture of black urban youth, (2) it is written by a man with a comprehensive knowledge of the literature in the field of education but also by a man who spent many years on the "firing line" as a teacher, (3) it is written by a teacher who has stayed in the system rather than abandoned it as a failure (Foster asserts that many books are writen by those who left or abandoned the system and laid the blame on a hopeless and unreformable system), (4) it is a "practical" book of more than 80 classroom experiences or "war stories" with lessons drawn from each (i.e., it is not theoretical or abstract), (5) though heavily documented the book is written in a style that facilitates reading by both the educational scholar and lay teacher.

This paper will present the thesis and some of the major points made by Foster in his book along with a critique of his approach. The critique will utilize comments made by reviewers of his book in addition to the views of this author. Also, an attempt will be made to apply some of Foster's educational concepts to other fields---specifically criminology (this author's field) and counseling/therapy.

Summary of Contents:

Foster maintains that the major problem in inner-city schools is a "culture gap" between largely black, lower-class youths and largely white, middle-class teachers. The communication gap produced by the culture gap impedes the educational process in that the students are constantly testing ("running games") the teachers who in turn misinterpret the games as disruptive and/or aggressive behavior and see them as indicative of an inability or unwillingness to learn. He suggests that white, middle-class teachers approach the school setting with certain stereotypes of black youth (e.g., that they are aggressive, lazy, "super-stud gorillas," non-verbal, etc.) and that the black youth likewise bring with them to school certain stereotypes of whites (e.g., that they are "faggots," racists, etc.). The failure to understand the perspective of the "opposing" group contributes to behavior on the part of both teachers and students that reinforces the cultural stereotypes of each.

The book (shorter versions of his concepts may be found in Foster, 1975 & Cole, 1974) is an attempt to educate the reader as

to the nature of the black, lower-class subculture and how that subculture leads many black students to "test" their teachers with "games" they have learned "on the streetcorner" (from the black lower-class subculture). Furthermore, suggestions are made as to how the teacher should respond to these tests/games so that they do not accelerate into major class-room disruptions or violence. He does not present standard rules that apply to every situation as he maintains that the response of the teacher must take into account the personality and teaching style of the teacher. Foster maintains that the teacher must first learn to recognize the games and then develop a response-style that fits him/her and that is effective. The closest thing to a rule he does present is that the teacher (when the game begins) might respond by saying, "I don't play that game."

Since the book is primarily addressed to teachers the focus of the book is on understanding the perspective of black students. Little attention is given to how students might better understand the perspective of their white, middle-class teachers (for a criticism in this regard see later comments). Thus the educational process to overcome the culture gap is approachd primarily from one side---the lack of knowledge of the teacher. Foster also emphasizes that the gap cannot be overcome unless the teacher understands himself, the motivation to teach in the inner-city school, how racist perceptions influence interactions in the classroom, etc.

Foster suggests that the patronizing and racist behavior ("the great white father syndrome"--Jones and Seagull, 1975) of many teachers has contributed to educational failure in inner-city schools. For example, he suggests that some white, middle-class persons see teaching in black schools as a type of mission to alleviate their guilt for the treatment of blacks by whites. This attitude leads them to be less demanding of black children, to allow them to get away with behavior they would not tolerate in white children, to be ingratiating, etc. He maintains that this behavior is not only racist, but that it allows black children to destroy themelves. He is quite critial of white teachers, who in an effort to identify with their black students, attempt to "talk dirty," dress in a slovenly manner, use jive talk, etc. He maintains that black students do not respect this type of behavior and that they expect teachers to talk and behave in a middle-class manner.

Foster delineates three types of games that are often played out in the classroom: (1) ribbin' (2) jivin' and (3) playing the dozens (p. 179ff). Ribbin' or ribbing is the verbal game of taunting, denigrating, or making fun of someone, their clothing, parts of their body (particularly their genitals or matters related to sexual performance). Students often run these games on each other or on the teacher. Foster presents a number of examples ("realities") in which ribbing games caused classroom problems. For example, a teacher might try to "be one of the boys" and play the game with his students only to be bested,

whereupon, he/she may feel insulted and even report the student. Some classroom disruption may be due to students ribbing each other. The teacher must be able to recognize and deal with these games.

Jivin' or jiving (p. 193ff) involves manipulative techniques used to persuade or "hustle" others in order that the manipulator may "survive," protect himself from threats to the ego, or simply to stay out of trouble. Foster distinguishes among "shuckin' and jivin'," "woofin' and "signifying." Shuckin' and jivin' involves behavior used with an authority figure that presents an appearance of acceptable and subservient behavior to placate the authority. For example, a student may suddenly "act" contrite after mishavior and become very submisive by making such comments as "yes suh, boss" (and perhaps accompanies this statement with a bowed head and shuffle). The teacher may accept the "repentance"---or know that it cannot be challenged-- while the student "wins" since his peers know that it is not sincere and that he will get away with the behavior and thus win the game.

Woofin' involves a vicious verbal attack that threatens, but does not intend, violence). For example, the student may walk toward the teacher and say, "I'me gonna punch you out." The intent is to terrify the teacher. A variation of this game is "mau-mauing"---when blacks play on the fears by whites of blacks and "play" angry militant to achieve some goal (p. 57ff). The third type of jivin' is signifying which involves someone creating a myth about a second person and telling them that a third person started it. For example, one student told a second that a third had "pulled a train last night" (had sex with several guys in a group). One critique (Yeakey, 1976) questioned whether distinctions could be consistently drawn between these type of games as suggested by Foster.

Playing the Dozens (p. 210ff) is an insult game in which the two or more contestants try to best each other in the degree of insult levied against the other. The game progresses until one or more contestants give up or lose their cool and resort to violence. Foster asserts that the game provides an outlet for aggressive feelings and teaches youths verbal skills and how to control one's temper. The insults often refer to sexual inadequacies or to sexual activity by one's mother (thus students when asked what playing the dozens means often say it is when someone says something bad about your mother).

Foster emphsizes that it is important to understand how students see the games so that the teacher's response will be appropriate. The student perspective is summarized as follows (p. 182):

> It must be re-emphasized that for lower-class black urban streetcorner men, rhetoric, repartee, and gamemanship are survival and coping techniques in the aggressive, hustling, verbal world of the streetcorner. These almost ritualized games are, in a sense, attempts

> at coping with and surviving economic and social racism, and to some extent are a way of getting even or beating 'the system.'
> On the streetcorner, verbal ability is rated as highly as is physical strength. Most often, when men gather, a boasting or teasing encounter takes place. Verbal content participation is an important part of peer relationships. Starting a verbal attack is 'mounting' or getting above an opponent. To lose a verbal battle is to become feminized. Strength and masculinity are shown by boasting or 'putting down' an adversary or a group of adversaries.

However, the perspective of the teacher with respect to the games is much different than that of the students. As Foster says (p. 180):

> From the teacher's point of view, however, the incident usually is not considered a game but disruptive behavior---somtimes terrifying disruption. Because the teacher may be unhip and square middle-class, he had no idea that the game is being run; all he experiences is the interference, the disruption, a horrible personal hurt and a sense of personal inadequacy. He often calls his students impertinent and disrespectful. Sometimes he interprets the rhetoric and verbal repartee as a threat of imminent violence.

Foster maintains that the black youth is simply behaving in the classroom as he does on the streets---according to the values of his subculture. Thus lower-class youth are conditioned to act in certain physical, aggressive and sexual ways. They have also been conditioned to expect adults (including the teacher) to act in certain ways. They expect the teacher to utilize strong physical control but when their expectations are not fulfilled, the student is disoriented. The student is likely to then revert to streetcorner behavior/games and disruption ensues.

In short, Foster seems to be saying that if the teacher finds himself/herself a white teacher in a blackboard jungle, it is a jungle of his/her own creation since the behavior of the teacher is largely responsible for the behavior of the students. The blame for the chaotic classroom environment and subsequent failure to educate is thus laid largely on the shoulders of the teacher who could solve the problem by simply recognizing the games for what they are and dealing with them in the suggested/effective manner. Some blame is attached to the racist society that created the subculture (p. 30,34,38) but Foster is not very critical of the school system in general. In fact, he asserts that the system is doing a "reasonable job" (Cole, 1974) under the circumstances. It is not so much that the system is corrupt but that the teachers are not trained properly to work with the students and the system. Foster's critics (e.g., Yeakey, 1976) believe that he is too kind to the school system. He likewise does not attach much blame to the students themselves

since they have a "healthy adaptation" to the affects of racism and poverty (p. 15). Certainly this attitude is diametrially opposed to the "reality therapy" advocated for the classroom by William Glasser (1969).

Foster suggests that running games on the teacher is not behavior that characterizes all black students. In fact, he categorizes the black student population into four categories and estimates the relative numbers in each (p. 28ff). He says that 60% of black youth in the inner-city schools have adopted the life style and behavior of the streetcorner (but have the potential for middle class behavior). Another 17% have adopted middle-class life style and behavior; 18% are emotionally and/or physically handicapped, and 6% are religious or politicized. However, at other times he seems to suggest that the number of students who actually attempt to run games on the teacher is quite small. Foster suggests that the number of students actively playing the games is not so important since the audience (the other students) is indirectly playing the games and loses respect for the teacher who does not play according to the rules or who plays and loses.

Ribbin'... also suggests that both black and white teachers are tested through games by (some) students and that many black, middle-class teachers are no more aware of the game playing techniques than are white middle-class teachers (a belief that is challenged by one critic--Yeakey, 1976). Thus he seems to be asserting that the culture gap is more class based than racially based. This position would seem problematic in that in his view the origins of the subculture are due to racial (and not class) discrimination. Furthermore, Foster also maintains that the streetcorner behavior/games that he describes are limited to northern schools and it is difficult to see how the subculture would be limited to northern ghettoes if it is created as a response to racism and poverty (certainly these conditions exist in the southern states).

Foster maintains that male and female teachers are tested differently by black students. Male teachers (whether white or black) are tested physically while female teachers (whether white or black) are tested sexually. For example, it is common for female teachers to receive comments about their sexual attractiveness or alleged sexual needs in order to see how they will react (p. 283ff). One teacher heard a student (as she walked down the school steps) say, "How about a kiss, baby?" She became embarrased and slapped the student. The young black responded by kicking her backside and was suspended. The teacher did not understand that from the student's perspective the comment was not a threat but "more likely a form of compliment."

On the other hand, male (especially white) teachers may be challenged in a more physical fashion. Foster tells the story of a white male teacher who was walking down the hall only to find his way blocked by two black male students. One student put his

arm against the wall and refused to let the teacher pass. The teacher, not wishing a confrontation, simply opted to go under the arm. The next time the boys saw the teacher they called him "Mr. Faggot" since he had met their physical challenge by backing down and thus demonstrated a lack of masculinity. Certainly the perspectives of the teacher and the student were quite different. At other times male teachers have lost the respect of their students because they ignored a comment about their mother (the student was attempting to play the dozens with the teacher) and thus the students saw the teacher as lacking masculinity since he would not defend someone who spoke ill of his own mother.

As a corollary to the discusion of differences in testing of male and female teachers, Foster suggests that sexism is often involved in the disciplining of students who run sexual games on teachers. If the student is a black female who attempts to run a game on (or perhaps seduce) her white male teacher she is not likely to be punished. However, if a black male student runs a game on (or attempts to seduce) a white female teacher he is likely to be disciplined. Black female students are rarely punished for involvement with white male teachers, even where the flirtations result in actual intercourse. However, if a white female teacher is involved with a black male student the consequences for both are likely to be quite serious. Foster implies that this difference involves sexism and racism (since whites are more protective of the virtue of white women). Interestingly, "it is the male teacher who is forced to resign or is fired and it is the male student who is suspended or expelled (p. 287).

Foster also devotes an entire chapter to the subject of discipline. He appears to be ambivalent on the appropriateness of corporal punishment (p. 268ff) in that he suggests that the anticorporal punishment position should be aware of several conditions (which he lists) of the inner-city school situation which must be taken into account. Foster maintains that there is a difference between corporal punishment and physical intervention in a conflict situation. The latter involves restraining the child who has lost control of his behavior. He attempts to distinguish between corporal punishment and physical restraint (p. 271,260) and suggests that the proper model for the teacher is that of the "interventionist" rather than the disciplinarian as traditionally viewed. He suggests that the role of the interventionist be based on an "educational model rather than from a police oriented model" (p. 262). Considerable space is devoted to describing this model and suggesting how teachers might be trained to utilize it. He also says that many teachers fixate on discipline, staying constantly on guard, never trusting, etc. and that their fear emboldens the child and causes him to exhibit even more acting-out behavior (Welsh, 1978).

Applications of Concepts to Other Fields:

This author became interested in Ribbin'... because of the

applicability of Foster's concepts to the fields of delinquency and criminology. Though there is considerable literature on the lower-class and/or black subculture (e.g., Curtis, 1974; Miller, 1958) there is not much written on the extent to which interactions between youths and authority figures can lead to violence if a "culture gap" exists. Perhaps the best known attempt to deal with interactions between black youth subculture and the police subculture is the work of Hans Toch (1969, 1975, & 1980) who has suggested that many violent incidents occur due to a failure of both the police and the youth to understand the perspective of the other. In one work (1975) Toch describes an educational model by which police are made aware of the culture gap and how their actions unwittingly lead to the very behavior which they seek to avoid. Likewise, Lockwood (1980), a student of Toch's, has written of the behavior of white inmates who are confronted by what Foster would call "woofin'" in the prison setting. Many of the verbal threats by black inmates are viewed by the white inmate recipients as being indicative of imminent rape attempts. Perhaps the best overall discussion of the importance of seeing the black perspective in trying to understand the behavior of black "clients" in the Criminal Justice System is a work by Owens (1980).

Certainly, white staff in the Criminal Justice System need to be aware of the type of games that clients/inmates may attempt to run on them and the purpose that such games serve. Foster's description of these games proved valuable to this writer and it would seem that some attention should be devoted to these games in staff training for jails, courts, police, prisons, etc.

At least one article in the field of counseling/therapy has noted the importance of Foster's concepts in Ribbin'.... Jones and Seagull (1977), in an article on problems encountered when white therapists work with black clients, suggest that the therapist must be aware of the games being run on the therapist (such as "shuckin'). Also, white therapists often incorrectly view the black client as non-verbal due to the utilization of black English. Actually, many blacks are highly verbal (Foster gives numerous examples of verbal skills in playing such games as the dozens), though not with standard English (Jones and Seagull, 1977, citing Foster).

Weaknesses of the Foster Approach:

Numerous questions arise when one reads Ribbin'... that call for further clarification. The need for clarification at various points might be considered a "weakness" in that the point (to the reader) was not made clearly. There are also facets of the Foster approach that appear to this author to be problematic. A number of these will now be listed and discussed. These needs for clarifiation/weaknesses should not be viewed as an attempt to negate the worth of the book (which is unquestioned). Rather the list represents a number of concerns that should be discussed by

those who are considering utilizing Foster's approach to the inner-city school dilemma.

First, the origin of the black subculture/streetcorner behavior is not sufficiently described. Foster does suggest that game playing is a defensive (p. 30) attempt to deal with a racist society and that some blacks have been forced to adopt it to help them survive in a racist environment. Lacking other avenues to prove masculinity and professional acumen, black youth sharpen their verbal skills via the games. He further suggests that the game playing adaptation is a "healthy adaptation" to the effects of racism and poverty (p. 15). It is difficult to see how this adaptation is healthy when even Foster believes that it is entirely counter-productive and destructive. Perhaps he means understandable rather than "healthy." As mentioned earlier, Yeakey (1976) criticizes Foster for suggesting that middle-class black teachers are as naive of the game playing as their white counterparts. Also, as mentioned earlier, there is no attempt to explain the assertion that the black streetcorner behavior developed only in the north. In short, readers who wish to understand the origins of the black subculture will find greater illumination in other works (e.g., Curtis, 1975).

Second, Foster appears at times to confuse the reasons for the creation of the subculture with the reasons for its maintenance/utilization by individual blacks. It is one thing to assert that the subculture was created as a reaction to and protest against the lack of legitimate opportunities provided to blacks in a racist society. It is quite another to assert, or even to imply, that individual blacks behave in accordance with subcultural beliefs/norms to protest black treatment by white society. Confusion of the two would lead one to argue that crime by most blacks is a protest or "act of survival" rather than an individual decision to violate property or person for personal gain. I believe the complex issue of individual motivation deserves more careful consideration.

Certainly, not all blacks utilize the subcultural norms (60% do by his count) and yet many of those who do not are raised in the same racist environment. Foster does not explain why some blacks appear to be immunized against the subculture. There also appears to be a tendency at times to read (project?) motives into the behavior of the black students that are without foundation. For example, Foster asserts that lower-class black students really want to be controlled (p. 321) and in fact yearn for stronger controls though they vehemently deny such an allegation (Miller, 1958, makes the same point). If they deny such an allegation it appears that their denial is proof of the claim. Such a belief is non-falsifiable in that admitting it shows the perception and honesty of the student and denying it shows the lack of understanding of underlying (even subconscious) motives or dishonesty. In this author's view, such psychoanalytic assumptions are inappropriate and Foster's case can (and should) be made without reliance upon them. Even if one grants the

sub-conscious desire for control on the part of students it is difficult to see why black students are more subject to such desires than are white students.

Third, Foster talks only of changing one "side" of the culture gap---that of the teachers. Teachers must understand "where the students are coming from" but there is litle indication in Ribbin'... that students must understand the perspective of the teacher. Though it is clear that the teacher must change (or at least understand) there does not seem to be much attention given to helping the students understand and change the game playing behavior which they utilize. The teacher is urged to indicate that he "does not play that game" (p. 232) but there does not appear to be any suggestion that the teacher should attempt to explain what is wrong with the games.

One can envision a "speech" or "war story" by a teacher about a student who was so proud of his ability to play the dozens that he wound up in prison or dead when a verbal conquest attempted to react physically. One could argue that simply refusing to play the games condones the games by the silence of the instructor. By contrast, Lockwood (1980) and Toch (1975) go into great detail as to how such subcultural behavior can be broken down or eliminated through attempts to teach participants the consequences of such games. At times Foster suggests that teachers might even play the games with students or even use physical force to win a game to gain the respect of students. One might argue that such behavior only re-inforces the belief in the rightness of the games. Granted the short term effect may be increased respect for the teacher who could play and win such games. However, the long-term effect could be continued faith in and use of such games. Yet it is interesting that at one point in expressing opposition to corporal punishment Foster suggests that by its utilization "a value is attached to the use of physical force to achieve goals, and this action becomes a model of negative aggression and violent behavior which could and often does lead to imitation by school children" (p. 271). It is difficult to see why verbal and physical participation in the games does not teach the same lesson. In fact, one might argue that the "endorsement" of the games by the teachers gives them some type of "external" validity (e.g., "See, even our teacher plays the dozens"). Though one critic ("Ribbin'..., 1974) may be right that Foster seeks to understand the subculture "but is no worshipper of it," it does not appear that he advocates directly condemning the negative aspects of that culture.

This author has done a good deal of research in the area of homicide (where the black offender rate is seven times that of the white rate--Wilbanks, 1982) and it appears that many homicides involving blacks are due to arguments involving game playing. Certainly teachers should not re-inforce the validity of these games in the minds of students.

Fourth, Foster's assessment of blame seems to focus heavily

on those who have failed to train teachers for their experience in inner-city schools. Though racism in the society and the schools is condemned he appears to argue that the problems that result can be remedied if teachers are properly trained to motivate the students. Some critics (Yeakey, 1976; Ribbin'..., 1974) have suggested that Foster is too kind to the school system. In short, there is nothing wrong with inner-city schools that well trained teachers cannot remedy.

The weight of blame (and responsibility) seems to lie with teachers in Foster's view. Certainly litle blame or responsibility is given to students as they are seen (even when they are disruptive or play games) as consciously or subconsciously seeking to learn and/or to be controlled. If they do not learn or are not controlled it appears to be the fault of the teachers who did not understand their true motives or were unable to effectively respond to their "call for help." Certainly this view is opposite to that of William Glasser in Schools Without Failure (1969) who utilizes the precepts of reality therapy to force students to take responsibility for changing their own behavior. Granted, the racist society, the school system, the teacher, etc., may be partly to blame for the situation that exists today in our schools. However, it does not follow that the recognition of these facts will help the student. In fact, a focus on the inadequacies of others (the teacher, the school system) may give the student someone to blame rather than to face the "reality" (Glasser's term) that only he can change the situation.

The situation is not unlike the psychiatrist who explains to society why certain persons commit irrational and violent acts in that they are seen as being the product of an environment that is faulty. It may be useful to understand that these conditions of the environment produced a "sick" individual. However, a focus on these causative factors may lead to the individual blaming his environment rather than simply being led to the point that he/she says, "Regardless of who made me this way there is only one person that can change me and that is me. I am responsible and I will change."

Fifth, Foster did not intend to provide a blueprint for teacher behavior (or a prescription for success) but only some general principles or examples which teachers might attempt to utilize depending upon their personality or life-style. However, the assumption that people can recognize what retorts or techniques (to use in responding to the game playing) fit their personality is questionable. Just as students need firm rules it is likely that teachers need certain rules. Foster's suggestion that at times a teacher might want to participate in the games and at other times not participate or that the standard retort, "I don't play that game" may be useful for some teachers does not appear to provide much direction (see Craft, 1975).

Foster may be perceptive enough to recognize what methods

are effective for himself (and others) but is is not likely that most teachers are that perceptive. If so why do we all engage in behavior all of our lives that is counter-productive to our goals? Many of the 'war stories" provide examples of what a teacher did and the outcome but the reader is often left to guess whether Dr. Foster approves of that response or what alternative response would have been more effective. In short, the lesson of many of the "realities"/illustrations/war stories are not clearly spelled out.

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